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ABSTRACT

Several authors have investigated the relationship among family variables and adolescent sexual behavior and young adolescents' use of alcohol has also been studied as it relates to family factors and sexual activity. This research is based on data from the second year of a six-year longitudinal study, which explores psychosocial and demographic factors associated with problem behaviors among adolescents. The specific aim of this study was to identify links among adolescents' family type, early sexual experience, and alcohol use. It was predicted that traditional family composition would be associated with lower levels of sexual activity and alcohol use across sex and race of subjects. Data were collected from 265 8th-grade students from a medium-sized southeastern town. Students' family types were identified by a self-administered checklist, and demographic data were obtained from school enrollment cards. Subjects' level of experience with alcohol and sexual intercourse was extracted from a self-reported list of 33 behaviors. The expectation that traditional families would be associated with lower levels of sexual intercourse was borne out in the data. White adolescents were more likely than blacks to use alcohol, across family type and sex of subject. The strongest relationship to emerge from these data was the link between sexual intercourse and alcohol use. This might be interpreted as showing that among young adolescents, especially whites, sexual activity and drinking are viewed as concurrent rites of passage. (LLL)

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Family Type as a Predictor of Sexual Intercourse and Alcohol Use in Young Adolescents

The research reported here is based on data from the second year of a six-year longitudinal study, the purpose of which is to explore psychosocial and demographic factors associated with problem behaviors among adolescents. The specific aim of the present analyses was to identify links among adolescents' family type, early sexual experience, and alcohol use.

The literature that deals with family effects on adolescents' behavior is inconclusive. Historically, the traditional family comprised of two biological parents and their children has been considered optimal, while other family structures have been viewed as problematic (Demo & Acock, 1988). Calabrese (1988), in a study of adolescent alienation, suggested that the non-traditional home may not be as influential as once thought. The need to clarify the definition of the single-parent family was addressed by Demo and Acock (1988), who differentiated among parents who were divorced, never married, separated, and widowed. These authors also argued that researchers should investigate other variables besides parents' marital status in the family environment. Recent studies have recognized the importance of other factors (e.g. race, sex, and social class) in mitigating the effects of family disruption. In a study of a large sample of black and white high school

students, Slater, Stewart and Linn (1983) found that girls had more negative post-divorce adjustment than did boys. In contrast, Needle, Su and Doherty (1990) reported that boys were more likely than girls to engage in delinquent behaviors following parental divorce. Flewelling and Bauman (1990) found no sex differences in the effects of marital disruption, but did find that white teens were more likely than non-white teens to be affected by family disorganization. An earlier analysis of the data from the present sample showed that an adolescent's family constellation was unrelated to her or his level of moral development (Manners & Smart, 1991). Researchers studying the traditional family have found that inept parenting practices were associated with adolescents' involvement with deviant peers (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger & Conger, 1991), and that prolonged economic stress was related to adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems (Takeuchi, Williams & Adair, 1991). Seydlitz (1991) found inconclusive results when examining the parental control strategies used in traditional families and their effects on young white adolescents' status offenses and substance use behaviors. Clearly, then, it is useful to continue to search for links between adolescents' family structure and problem behaviors.

Several authors have investigated the relationship among family variables and adolescent sexual behavior. White and DeBlassie (1992), in a review article, concluded that parenting,

specifically family communication, is the most important factor in determining adolescents' sexual activity. Flewelling and Bauman (1990) reported that young adolescents from intact families were less likely to engage in sexual intercourse. In a short-term longitudinal study of white adolescent virgins of both sexes, it was found that parental marital status and its changes were related to the initiation of sexual intercourse (Newcomer & Udry, 1987). Similar results were found in a small sample of pregnant black adolescents from low income divorced families (Pete & DeSantis, 1990). With regard to race and sex differences in young adolescents' sexual behavior, a retrospective study of college students who were classified as either early or late initiators of sexual activity showed that more blacks had early sex than whites, and that late starters were more likely to use effective contraception than were early starters (Faulkenberry, Vincent, James & Johnson, 1987).

Young adolescents' use of alcohol has been studied as it relates to family factors and sexual activity. Flewelling and Bauman (1990) reported lower levels of substance use, including alcohol, among young adolescents from traditional families, across race and sex. In a longitudinal study of 467 families, Needle et al. (1990) found that divorce during children's adolescence was related to higher levels of substance use, especially for boys, and that parents' remarriage eased substance involvement for boys, but increased it for girls. Links between alcohol use and age-of-onset

of sexual intercourse were examined by Flanigan and Hitch (1986) for a sample of white single women. Results showed that women who did not plan their first intercourse were more likely to use alcohol before sex than were women who expected to have a sexual encounter. Furthermore, over half of the planners used contraception at their first intercourse, compared with only a quarter of the non-planners. It might be concluded, then, that alcohol use contributes to unplanned sexual activity among adolescents, as well as to risky sexual behaviors.

In the present study, it was predicted that traditional family composition would be associated with lower levels of sexual activity and alcohol use across sex and race of subjects. No predictions were made for single-parent, blended, or extended families regarding influence on sexual activity or drinking. Following Demo and Acock (1988), it was decided that these analyses should be limited to an exploration of the effects of various types of non-traditional families.

Method

Subjects

Data were collected from 283 students, the entire 8th grade class, enrolled during the 1990-91 academic year, from a medium-sized southeastern town. One hundred eighty-four subjects (65%)

were white, and 99 (35%) were black. The sample was evenly split between females (51%) and males (49%). Of the 265 students having valid questionnaires for family type, 134 (50%) were from traditional families, 50 (19%) were from single-parent families, 50 (19%) were from blended families, which included a step-parent, and 31 (12%) were from extended families, which included grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins.

Instruments

Students' family types (traditional, single-parent, blended or extended families) were identified by a self-administered checklist; and demographic data were obtained from school enrollment cards. Subjects' level of experience with alcohol and sexual intercourse was extracted from a self-reported list of 33 behaviors. This Experience Checklist, constructed by the first author, required the subjects to check whether they had engaged in each behavior within the past year, or within the past month.

Procedure

Data were collected by the authors over two successive days during the subjects' regular English classes at school. Subjects completed all questionnaires individually, then deposited them in a sealed box through a slot. Classroom teachers did not participate in the data collection. Analyses consisted of a series of Chi-squares in which family type, race, sex, sexual intercourse, and alcohol use were the variables.

Results

Across all subjects, 199 (70.32%) reported never having experienced sexual intercourse, 31 (10.95%) had had sex within the past year, 37 (13.07%) within the past month, and 16 (5.65%) reported ongoing sexual experience. A similar pattern of alcohol use was reported: 206 subjects (72.79%) had not begun drinking, while 31 (10.95%) reported having used alcohol within the past year, 34 (12.01%) within the past month, and 12 (4.24%) on a regular basis.

Insert Table Here

Sex of subject was associated with sexual intercourse for black students only (χ^2 (df=3) = 11.13, $p < .05$). Black males were more likely than black females to be involved in regular intercourse, while black females were more likely to have just begun their sexual careers. Family type was associated with sexual intercourse for both blacks (χ^2 (df=9) = 23.29, $p < .01$) and whites (χ^2 (df=3) = 23.42, $p < .01$), as well as for the full sample (χ^2 (df=9) = 29.66, $p < .005$). For female subjects, but not males, family type was associated with sexual intercourse (χ^2 (df=9) = 26.23, $p < .01$). Girls from single-parent and extended families were most likely to have just begun to have sex. The highest

proportion of virgins was in traditional families (82.86%), the lowest proportion in extended families (40%). Race of subjects was associated with sexual intercourse for males (χ^2 (df= 3) = 11.75, $p < .01$) and females (χ^2 (df=3) = 27, $p < .005$), with blacks more likely to be involved with ongoing sex (for boys), and beginning sex (for girls); and whites of both sexes more likely to be sexually inexperienced. Overall, students from traditional and blended families were least likely to have begun their sexual careers within the past month and most likely to be virgins.

No relationship was found between alcohol use and family type (χ^2 (df=9) = 6.7, $p > .05$), or between alcohol use and sex of subject (χ^2 (df=3) = 1.17, $p > .05$). Using alcohol was associated with race (χ^2 (df=3) = 10.59, $p < .05$). White students were more likely to drink, and to drink earlier and more regularly than were blacks. A strong relationship emerged between alcohol use and sexual intercourse, across race and sex of subject (χ^2 (df=9) = 78.97, $p < .005$). Students who reported having used alcohol only within the past month also had recently begun their sexual careers.

Discussion

The authors' expectation that traditional families would be associated with lower levels of sexual intercourse was borne out in the data. This finding lends support to the conclusions of

Flewelling and Bauman (1990), Newcomer and Udry (1987), and Pete and DeSantis (1990). There appears to be a stronger link between family type and sexual activity for girls than for boys, which is consistent with Slater et al. (1983), but counter to Needle et al. (1990). It is worth noting that students from blended families were only slightly more likely than their traditional-family peers to be sexually active. The extended family, which includes adults besides the parents, was not associated with low levels of sexual intercourse among their young adolescent members. One interpretation of this finding might be that in our culture, extended families occur because of some disruption in the traditional family structure. An alternative reading might be simply that the number of extended families in this sample (31) is too small to be a basis for such an inference. Black subjects, particularly black males, were more likely than their white peers to have already begun their sexual careers, a finding that is consistent with that of Faulkenberry et al. (1987).

With regard to alcohol use, the only demographic variable found to be significant was race. White adolescents were more likely than blacks to use alcohol, across family type and sex of subject. This result is in contrast to those of Flewelling and Bauman (1990) and Needle et al. (1990), who concluded that non-traditional family structure was related to adolescents' substance use. The strongest relationship to emerge from these data was the

link between sexual intercourse and alcohol use. This might be interpreted as showing that among young adolescents, especially whites, sexual activity and drinking are viewed as concurrent rites of passage. Not coincidentally, this is the same message conveyed by advertisements for alcoholic beverages.

Barely half the students in the sample were from traditional families, yet only about one third of all the subjects were engaged in alcohol use and sexual intercourse. Building on these data, future research should explore the strengths of different types of non-traditional families. The blended family, which is shown here to be much like the traditional family, would be an especially likely prospect for further study. Another area that should be investigated is the difference between white and black adolescents in their motivation to begin sexual activity. It may be possible to tailor sex education efforts to specific groups of teenagers, if we find that the reasons for early intercourse vary. Finally, although not a part of the data reported here, it should be noted that of the 84 subjects who had experienced sexual intercourse, only 13 reported having used any type of contraception. This finding alone should be reason enough to pursue research into the kinds of social decision making required of young adolescents.

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Table

Sexual intercourse and alcohol use of students, across sex and race.

	Not Within Past Year	Within Past Year	Within Past Month	Regularly
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Sexual Intercourse	199 (70.32)	31 (10.95)	37 (10.07)	16 (5.65)
Drinking Alcohol	206 (72.79)	31 (10.95)	34 (12.01)	12 (4.24)